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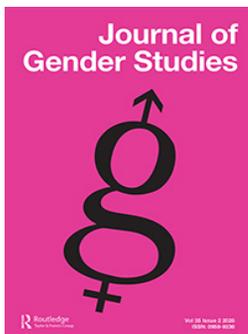
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To cite this article: Serena Vicario & Nick J. Fox (28 Feb 2026): Alcohol consumption and the production of gender binarism: a more-than-human perspective, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2026.2637519](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2026.2637519)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2026.2637519>



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Alcohol consumption and the production of gender binarism: a more-than-human perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex interactions between gender and alcohol consumption. Drawing on more-than-human feminist materialist theories of gender, it diverges radically from the humanist, essentialist and practice-focused approaches underpinning much of the previous literature, suggesting instead that alcohol consumption contributes to the male/female gender binary. The paper analyses data on women's alcohol consumption using a relational, post-anthropocentric and monist ontology that explores the material assemblages surrounding drinking occasions, while also acknowledging the capacities of non-human matter, including alcohol, to affect what human bodies can do. Data comprises 41 narrative interviews addressing drinking practices and daily routines of 21 English working mothers, up to three years after giving birth. We present cartographic representations of three complex, more-than-human drinking assemblages, comprising human bodies, alcohol, other non-human matter, places and spaces. We then document the physical, sociocultural, psychological and economic affects of alcohol on human subjects. By assessing these micropolitics of alcohol consumption, what capacities were privileged or suppressed and what possibilities or constraints on actions were established, we make sense of how alcohol can contribute to the aggregation of human bodies into socially defined categories, including a female/male gender binary.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 May 2025
Accepted 16 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Alcohol; assemblage; gender; gender binary; new-materialism; affect

Introduction

The relationship between gender and alcohol consumption has been explored extensively in biomedical and health, social science and feminist literatures (Cook et al., 2025). Ethyl alcohol has been implicated in a range of adverse health outcomes, including liver and cardiovascular diseases, cancer and mental health conditions, which tend to manifest more rapidly and severely in women than in men (Erol & Karpyak, 2015; Griswold et al., 2018; McCaul et al., 2019). These differences underpin the development of alcohol-consumption guidelines, which often set distinct recommendations for women and men; gender-sensitive approaches to the early detection and treatment of alcohol-use

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disorders; and sex-specific cut-off thresholds in screening tools for alcohol dependence (European Commission, Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety, 2024; Ingesson-Hammarberg et al., 2024; McCaul et al., 2019).

Sociological and social geographic studies have examined how social structures, social norms of behaviour and social constructions of femininity and masculinity shape gendered drinking patterns (Cook et al., 2022; Emslie et al., 2015; Harding et al., 2021; Kersey et al., 2022; Kersey & Lyons, 2025; Lyons & Gough, 2017; Vicario et al., 2021a, 2021b; Waitt & Clement, 2016). Feminist and 'postfeminist' perspectives have suggested that women's drinking expresses individuality, choice, and empowerment, but also involves self-surveillance and discipline, with women expected to manage their own choices (Atkinson et al., 2022; Harding et al., 2021; Kersey et al., 2025).

Often in biomedical, public health and some sociological literatures, a linear model of causation has been invoked, for instance when considering the differential impacts of alcohol on men and women (Erol & Karpyak, 2015; Wilsnack et al., 2005), or how gendered stereotypes affect alcohol use and abuse (Bell et al., 2009). This paper offers a different proposition, that alcohol consumption is one of a myriad of daily events whose physical, social and cultural capacities interact with disparate and diverse human bodies in ways that aggregate them into a simplistic male/female duality.

The gender binary refers to a conceptual framework that originated from entrenched biological, essentialist assumptions that classified gender into two discrete, mutually exclusive categories: female/women and male/men with fixed, often biologically determined characteristics (Hyde et al., 2019; Saguy et al., 2021). Across psychology, neuroscience, social theory and alcohol studies, the gender binary operates as a dominant yet reductive organizing principle, despite extensive evidence of variability and overlap in bodies and social identities (Hunt & Antin, 2019; Hyde et al., 2019; Saguy et al., 2021; Shelton & Dodd, 2021). This binary supplies the foundation for social and cultural norms, beliefs, constructs and prejudices that have established 'male' privilege at the expense of those aggregated into a 'female' gender (Allred et al., 2014; Braidotti, 2003, 2013; Colebrook, 2008), and in turn feeds gender-relative moral constraints on behaviour, including drinking patterns.

Dualisms such as male/female have been criticized more generally in recent materialist theory (Fox & Allred, 2017; van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010, p. 156). For Deleuze and Guattari, whose ontology emphasized multiplicity and difference (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 4), dualisms such as surface/depth, nature/culture, human/non-human and indeed male/female impose artificial limitations and rigid hierarchies on thought and reality, hindering the understanding of continuous processes, flows and multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 23).

To address our proposition, the paper builds on recent scholarship that has employed affect and assemblage theories to explore alcohol and drug use (Bøhling, 2014, 2014; Duff, 2007; Kersey & Lyons, 2025; Månsson et al., 2024). Specifically, the paper applies the 'ethological' ontology of Deleuze (1988, pp. 127–129) and the toolkit of concepts developed in Deleuze and Guattari's critical 'ethology' of social and natural worlds. Their materialist, relational and post-anthropocentric approach acknowledges the capacities of non-human matter (including alcohol) to affect in their own right (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010). This 'new materialist' ontology has been widely applied to social and

cultural issues, including alcohol and drug consumption (Alldred & Fox, 2015; Duff, 2014; Fox, 2016; Malins, 2004; Waitt & De Jong, 2014). It enables exploration of the forces (or 'affects') between bodies and alcohol, and the ways in which the capacities of both alcohol and gendered bodies emerge in what we call 'alcohol assemblages'.

We apply this ethological approach and methodology to empirical data from a qualitative study exploring alcohol consumption among working mothers (Vicario et al., 2021a), to ask: 'in what ways may human engagements with alcohol contribute to a male/female gender binary in contemporary Western culture?' Following an ethological ontology, the focus is not on social mechanisms or structures (understood as patterned relations and institutional arrangements that organize social life) (Bourdieu, 1989), but on daily events and interactions and the complex more-than-human assemblages of human bodies, alcohol, places and spaces, and many other socio-material elements that constitute the entirety of the social and natural world (Fox & Alldred, 2018; Latour, 2005).

The paper first reviews the principal perspectives on gender and alcohol. It then sets out the more-than-human ontology applied, and how this translated into a methodology and specific data collection and analysis methods. In line with this, the findings explore several alcohol/gender assemblages, the affective flows generated, and the capacities that these alcohol assemblages produce in human bodies. Finally, the analysis and its implications for social and public health research on alcohol and gender are discussed.

Background

Health science perspectives on alcohol and gender

Within health sciences, research on alcohol and gender has primarily focused on biological, epidemiological and public health dimensions of consumption. Biomedical models conceptualize drinking in quantitative terms – amount, frequency, and patterns – seeking to identify causal links between alcohol exposure and physiological outcomes (Cohn, 2014). These approaches have consistently revealed sex-specific variations in alcohol metabolism, hormonal and neurobiological processes and immune response, which collectively render women more vulnerable to alcohol-related harm (Erol & Karpyak, 2015; McCaul et al., 2019).

While health sciences research highlights women's heightened biological vulnerability to alcohol-related harm, global epidemiological data shows that women generally drink less, engage less often in heavy episodic drinking, and consume smaller quantities of alcohol than men (Griswold et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2024). These differences are less pronounced in high-income countries, a trend linked to shifts in social position, greater economic autonomy and targeted alcohol marketing (Holmila & Raitasalo, 2005; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). Public health scholarship also highlights how gendered drinking patterns are influenced by broader social determinants of health – such as class, welfare regimes, age, ethnicity, and sexuality – underscoring the need to situate drinking within the structural and intersectional contexts of people's lives (Boyd et al., 2022; Kuntsche et al., 2011; Leggat et al., 2022).

Social and critical perspectives on gender and alcohol

Feminist, sociological and critical alcohol studies have illuminated the gendered meanings of alcohol consumption and the moral hierarchies embedded within them. Historically, women's drinking has been subject to greater moral scrutiny than men's, reflecting the persistence of a double standard that equates femininity with purity, self-restraint, and care for others (Cook et al., 2022; Lyons, 2009; Waterson, 2000). Feminist historians and critical alcohol scholars have demonstrated how women's consumption of alcohol has been positioned as transgressive, violating ideals of respectable femininity and threatening the moral order of the domestic sphere (Day et al., 2004; Ettore, 1997; Järvinen, 1991; Staddon, 2015).

Mothers' drinking, in particular, has been constructed as a social problem. Within policy, media, and popular culture, the drinking mother functions as a potent symbol of moral failure, her behaviour imagined as endangering both familial and societal health (Bell et al., 2009; Boyd, 2015; Campbell, 2002; Day et al., 2004; Staddon, 2015). These normative frameworks reflect what Hays (1996) called 'intensive motherhood', where women's identities are tightly bound to caregiving and self-sacrifice. Consequently, women in caring roles often present their alcohol use as moderate, controlled, and justified – as a strategy to avoid the stigma associated with moral irresponsibility (Patsouras et al., 2025; Vicario et al., 2021a).

Social constructionist approaches, influenced by feminist and post-structuralist theory, challenge essentialist understandings of gender and drinking behaviour. Instead, they view both as performative and negotiated – produced through social interactions, discourses, and embodied practices (Emslie et al., 2015; Hunt & Antin, 2019; Kersey et al., 2022; Lyons, 2009). This perspective, drawing on Butler's (2004) conception of gender performativity and Messerschmidt's (2019) work on masculinities, positions drinking as a site through which gender identities are enacted, reinforced, and occasionally subverted. Intersectional analyses extend this insight by recognizing that the performance of gender through drinking is shaped by material conditions, geography, social affiliation, and embodied experience (Holloway et al., 2009; Lennox et al., 2018; Lunnay et al., 2022; Törrönen et al., 2017). Thus, alcohol becomes a medium through which individuals negotiate their place within shifting social hierarchies of gender, class, race, and sexuality.

In Western postfeminist contexts, representations of femininity increasingly valorize agency, empowerment and consumption, blending feminist ideals of equality with neo-liberal imperatives of self-responsibility, hedonism, and self-regulation (Gill, 2017, 2019; Schippers & Sapp, 2012). Within this cultural framework, women's drinking may signify freedom, pleasure, or self-care, even as it reinforces the demand that women continually manage and discipline their bodies (Emslie et al., 2015; Kersey, 2022; Patsouras et al., 2025). The 'wine mom' trope, for instance, both normalizes women's consumption as a coping mechanism and obscures the structural inequalities that make such coping necessary (Harding et al., 2021). For men, alcohol functions as a key resource in the performance of hegemonic masculinity, associating drinking prowess with strength, risk-taking, and control (Hunt & Antin, 2019; Lyons, 2009). Yet abstention or moderation can also become avenues for reconfiguring masculinity, enabling emotional openness and vulnerability (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2020). A social constructionism approach allows

representation of how drinking and non-drinking practices may be implicated in the maintenance and shaping of gender relations, including the gender binary. However, by prioritizing discourses and meaning-making in shaping reality, it overlooks materialities and biology (Fraser et al., 2014; Kersey et al., 2023).

Attempting to reconcile biological, material, and social accounts, Kersey et al. (2023) proposed a critical realist framework for studying gendered drinking. This approach acknowledges the material reality of alcohol's psychoactive effects and embodied differences, while emphasizing that our understanding of these realities is socially mediated. By integrating biological processes, agency, and structural conditions, critical realism offers a way to conceptualize how alcohol's effects are simultaneously material and discursive – produced through the interaction of bodies, substances, and socio-cultural environments.

Relational and more-than-human approaches

More recent work has pushed beyond human-centred frameworks, drawing on relational, affective and posthumanist theories to reconceptualize alcohol use as an assemblage of human and non-human interactions. Relational more-than-human perspectives reject essentialist understandings of both substances and subjects, viewing them instead as co-constituted through dynamic entanglements of bodies, technologies, spaces, and affects (Bøhling, 2015; Duff, 2007, 2014; Jayne & Valentine, 2024).

Kersey and Lyons (2025) argued that women's embodied experiences and the meanings of drinking are shaped not only by discourses of femininity but also by alcohol's material and affective properties, which generate specific 'atmospheres' linking emotion, environment, and bodily response. Similarly, Alldred and Fox (2015) identified alcohol, nightlife venues, and technologies of seduction as part of young men's sexuality assemblages, demonstrating how gender and desire emerge through multispecies and material relations rather than pre-existing categories (see also Lambevski, 2005). Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2023) extended this to propose an 'atmospheric assemblages' framework that attends to the agency of non-human actants – such as lighting, glassware, music, and spatial design – in shaping alcohol-related practices.

'Assemblage thinking' has informed a growing body of critical intoxication studies, which conceptualize drinking as a process of ongoing becoming rather than a discrete act (Bøhling, 2015; Duff, 2014; Pedersen et al., 2017; Shaw, 2014; Wilkinson, 2017). Within this ontology, gender is not a stable determinant of behaviour but an emergent effect of human – nonhuman interactions (Waitt & Clement, 2016; Waitt & De Jong, 2014). For example, Waitt and De Jong (2014) showed that women's alcohol-related pleasures in urban nightlife spaces can generate new bodily skills and forms of self-expression that temporarily disrupt normative gender identities, allowing women to 'become-other' in public spaces. However, Jayne and Valentine (2024, p. 102) argued that much of this work only partially embraces the transformative potential of materialist ontologies, often reasserting human-centred interpretations of affect and agency. They called for deeper engagement with post-anthropocentric perspectives that recognize how alcohol-related practices are distributed across networks of human and non-human forces, thus destabilizing both the notion of individual agency and the binary organization of gender itself.

Feminist materialist scholarship further develops this argument by demonstrating how gender emerges through socio-material engagements between bodies, environments,

and technologies. Coleman (2009) defined gender as one of the ways in which bodies' affective capacities become organized, while Coffey (2019) showed that gendered embodiment is assembled through interactions with human and non-human matter. Parker (2011) similarly illustrated how everyday engagements with domestic and urban spaces produce the micropolitics of gender – where resistance and conformity coexist.

Of particular relevance to the present study is Grosz's (1993) reflection upon Deleuze and Guattari's (1988, pp. 291–292) concept of 'becoming-woman'. Rather than denoting a fixed female identity, becoming-woman signifies a processual movement towards multiplicity and indeterminacy of gender – what Grosz (1993, p. 179) called 'a thousand tiny sexes'. This Deleuze-inspired notion of a multiplicity of gender becomings grounded in difference rather than identities (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2013) challenges the ontological stability of gender binaries. In the context of the present study, Grosz's focus on becoming supplies an ontological foundation from which to analyse the impact of alcohol-related sociomaterial assemblages on gender binarism.

The following section builds on these relational and post-anthropocentric approaches, setting out the new materialist and micropolitical ontology used in this paper, and how this then translated into a methodology of inquiry and the research methods used to analyse the empirical data.

A new materialist and micropolitical approach: from ontology to methodology

To address the research question set out in the introduction, this paper is informed by the materialist, relational and post-anthropocentric shift in social science ontology described as the 'turn to matter' (Diener, 2020, p. 45). Approaches within this turn include affect theories (Anderson, 2009; Massumi, 1996), assemblage theory or thinking (Buchanan, 2021; DeLanda, 2016), agential realism (Barad, 2007), ethology (Deleuze, 1988), new materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010; Fox & Alldred, 2017), non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008), vital materialism (Bennett, 2010) and posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013).

These approaches share three ontological orientations. First, they adopt a relational rather than essentialist perspective, focusing upon the fluid, context-specific capacities that matter acquires when interacting with other materialities (Deleuze, 1988). The key question to be asked is no longer what a body or a drug such as alcohol is, but rather, 'what can it do?' or 'what are its capacities in a specific setting?'

Second, these ontologies are post-anthropocentric, recognizing that both human and non-human matter possess capacities to affect or be affected in their own right (Braidotti, 2013). This perspective runs counter to a long-standing humanism in much social research that emphasized human agency, and established deep-seated dualisms such as nature/culture, animate/inanimate and human/non-human (van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010).

Lastly, these ontologies reject the idea of social structures operating behind the scenes and adopt a monist or 'flat' ontology of the social and natural world (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994; Fox & Alldred, 2018; Latour, 2005). There is no 'other level' of systems or mechanisms operating beneath or beyond the immediate interactions of daily life to establish fixed cause-effect patterns. Instead, the capacities of bodies or other matter are highly contingent and emerge as a consequence of complex interactions between human and non-human matter.

Ash (2020) and Jayne and Valentine (2024) have suggested the concept of ‘de-determination’ to describe a non-linear understanding of causation, in which causality is redistributed across an assemblage (Ash, 2020). In this perspective, causality is neither linear nor hierarchical but relational, multi-directional and rhizomatic.

This relational, post-anthropocentric, and monist ontology is here operationalized via the ‘ethology’ set out by Deleuze (1988), pp. 125–129; see also Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 256–257). Ethology uses four closely related conceptual tools: affect, assemblage, capacity and micropolitics. are the capacities of material and social entities to affect or be affected by other matter (Deleuze, 1988, pp. 125–126). They are the sole motivators of events, engagements and interactions between different materialities (for instance, between ethyl alcohol and a human body) that together constitute the unfolding reality of the natural and social world.

Such events and interactions are of disparate matters, continually in flux and emerging around specific combinations of matter (Deleuze, 1988). For instance, a ‘party-assemblage’ might comprise human bodies, music, alcohol or other drugs, and a suitable physical venue. The affects in assemblages establish what bodies and other matter can do physically, biologically, psychologically, emotionally, economically, politically and so on: in other words, their . Consequently, capacities are contingent, rather than fixed attributes (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze, 1988). For example, in the party-assemblage, alcohol and music may contribute to humans’ capacities to dance, converse and flirt. Simultaneously, this assemblage enables alcohol’s capacities to affect humans physically, psychologically and emotionally.

The flows of affect within and between assemblages, and the capacities they produce, establish a (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 123), which can have longer lasting impacts on how matter interacts: what capacities are privileged or suppressed; what constraints or possibilities for action (territorializations and de-territorializations) are established; and how matter is aggregated into narrow socially-defined categories. Thus, in this study we conjecture that the assemblages surrounding alcohol consumption aggregate humans physically, psychologically and emotionally and then territorialize what these binarised genders can do.

An ethological methodology has been productively applied in empirical social science research across a range of topics including health (Duff, 2014; Fox, 2011), ageing (Cluley et al., 2023), well-being (McLeod, 2018), sexuality and sexual violence (Bhana et al., 2025; Janak & Bhana, 2023) and gender (Coffey, 2019; Coleman, 2009). Ethological studies relevant for this paper include the work of Bøhling (2015), Duff (2014), Malins (2004) and Pedersen et al. (2017) on drug and alcohol use or addictions. Malins (2004) shifted the ontological focus from ‘a drug user’ to drug/body assemblages, to explore how these assemblages enable or constrain bodily capacities. Similarly, Duff’s (2014) focus was on how bodies, alcohol and drugs and spaces assemble and the capacities these assemblages produce.

Methods

Participants and recruitment

This study draws on qualitative research exploring how alcohol consumption contributes to the production and maintenance of the female/male gender binary among working mothers in England. Fieldwork was conducted between May 2017 and November 2018 following ethical approval from the University of Sheffield (UK).

Eligibility criteria required participants to be over 18, employed, and first-time mothers who had returned to work within two years of maternity leave. All participants consumed alcohol at least once a month and self-identified as non-dependent drinkers. Recruitment began through university networks and was expanded via community flyers, childcare centres, Facebook parenting groups, and snowball sampling.

The final sample comprised 21 heterosexual women aged 23–40: ten in professional occupations, eight in non-professional roles, and three in intermediate positions, as defined by the UK Office for National Statistics. Eleven participants were married, nine cohabiting, and one was separated. Participants' self-identification as non-dependent drinkers was explored through accounts of their drinking practices. To minimize the risk of encouraging socially desirable responses, participants were not asked to quantify alcohol intake precisely; instead, indirect information was obtained through references to consumption frequency and style, as well as drink types and sizes (Vicario et al., 2021a). All reported low-risk drinking (≤ 14 units per week), though 13 described at least one recent episode of moderate heavy drinking (five to seven units within three to six hours). None belonged to recognized vulnerable groups (for example, people with severe mental health conditions or experiencing recent trauma).

Data collection

Anchored in a new materialist ontology, the study adopted a post-anthropocentric stance that foregrounds the entanglement of human and non-human actors – bodies, substances, affects, and environments – within assemblages of alcohol use. Rather than privileging human agency or representation, the approach attends to the relational and affective capacities that emerge through these assemblages.

Although some posthumanist scholars critique interview methods for their humanist assumptions (MacLure, 2013; St. Pierre, 2014), others demonstrate that interviews can generate valuable insights into material and affective relations (Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). Following this latter view, the study employed qualitative interviews to explore how alcohol, spaces, objects, and bodies interact in participants' everyday lives. The aim was not to produce coherent narratives of experience but to generate data attentive to the micropolitics of human/non-human entanglements and the affective capacities they produce (Fox & Alldred, 2015, 2022).

Data were collected through two semi-structured, in-person interviews with each participant, drawing on Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) free association narrative technique. This method encourages spontaneous storytelling and associative reflection, thereby revealing the social, material, and emotional contexts of drinking

practices. The first interview elicited broad accounts of participants' current and past drinking, while the second, conducted one to four weeks later, focused on themes that had emerged in the initial conversation. All interviews were carried out by the first author, an experienced female researcher and former alcohol-treatment practitioner. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Participants were informed of their right to pause or withdraw at any time and were provided with details of relevant support services.

Data analysis

Consistent with the study's post-anthropocentric ontology, data analysis departed from conventional thematic approaches centred on human subjectivity. Instead, the analytical task was to identify the relational assemblages through which alcohol practices acquire meaning and to trace their micropolitical effects on women's embodied capacities. Interviewees were treated not as privileged actors within assemblages providing transparent representations of their experiences, but as 'key informants' (Fox & Alldred, 2022, p. 172) supplying insider information about the relations and materialities composing these assemblages.

Using NVivo, transcripts were coded to identify three interrelated dimensions:

- : the human and non-human elements involved in drinking events (e.g. alcohol, glassware, spaces, childcare routines, partners, friends, and professional norms);
- : the physical, psychological, emotional, economic and other capacities to affect or be affected that draw these relations into assemblage; and
- : the bodily and social states these affective flows enable or constrain, such as inebriation, intimacy, productivity, or parental responsibility.

This coding process supported the mapping of alcohol assemblages and their micropolitical dynamics, including processes of *embodiment* that differentiate bodies within a gender binary, and the *materiality* (specifications) and *temporality* (generalizations) that stabilize or disrupt these gendered categorizations. The results presented in the following section draw directly on this assemblage-based analysis and coding frame to explore how women and alcohol are embedded in complex affective and material assemblages.

Findings

This section presents the ethological analysis of the study data. First, we summarize three illustrative *assemblages* that reveal the wide range of human and non-human materialities that assemble around alcohol consumption. These assemblages emerge as a consequence of the *entanglement* between these materialities, and in the second sub-section we explore in greater detail the physical, psychological, sociocultural and economic affects in these alcohol assemblages, and document the *embodiment* these affects produce in human bodies. Finally, we assess the *temporality* that these affects established in the three alcohol assemblages described in the first sub-section, examining how these affects

enabled or constrained what bodies could do, and the aggregations these produced, including into narrow gender categories.

Alcohol assemblages

In the interviews, informants reported a variety of socio-material interactions surrounding drinking occasions. These included human matter (the informants themselves, friends, family members, partners, colleagues, incidental strangers, etc.); non-human matter (household contents; alcohol in various forms, food, beauty products, digital devices, branded market products, means of transport, etc.); physical settings (home and working environments, playgroups, healthcare services, pubs and restaurants, concerts, towns and cities, etc.); and abstract social formations, legislation, routines, alcohol guidelines and exercise regimes pertaining to gender relations and cultural configurations of femininities and masculinities.

In ethological ontology, every sociomaterial interaction, encounter or event is a more-than-human assemblage. To manage these myriad assemblages, the analysis first sought to synthesize these data into a reportable format. The three synthetic categories reported below: 'domestic/family assemblages', 'social assemblages', and 'alcohol/sport assemblages' successfully summarized almost all of the alcohol-related assemblages reported by study informants.

Informants described occasions when analysis was consumed in the home or during occasions involving wider family gatherings. Exemplary of alcohol consumption in domestic settings, this extract from P15's interview acknowledges the fluid and emerging features of the domestic drinking assemblages:

[Drinking] depends on a lot around sort of [husband's] working patterns ... he's away for dinner or if we're eating with [child] then we don't have a drink, but we might have one maybe later in the evening, after she's gone to bed or, if we're having a take-away or something we might have a glass of wine So it's probably a combination of how our evening is, what's going on the next day ... and if you've got it in the house And we don't necessarily both drinks. Sometimes [husband] has a beer and I don't. (P15)

From this and other interviews, we identified a wide range of material elements in domestic/family drinking assemblages. These may be listed as (in no particular order):

human bodies (woman, partner, child); non-human matter (alcohol, glasses, TV, other domestic appliances, take away meals, 'comfort' foods, non- or low-alcohol drinks etc.); spaces (living room, kitchen, supermarket, off-licence etc) and other contexts (time of day, daily routines, working times, childcare commitments etc.)

Informants also described occasions when they consumed alcohol in social settings beyond domestic settings or family occasions, both before and after the birth of their child. In this extract, P14 reported on such occasion.

Last Sunday ... we left the baby with my parents ... and we went to a music concert, and we camped. It was an outdoor concert, and we were able to watch the music ... and have some pints of beer and sit on a rug on the floor, and that was really nice, because there was no baby and we didn't have to go home ... I probably drank more than I normally would, because I could and because ... I was enjoying the environment. (P14)

In events such as these, alcohol and bodies assemble with a much wider range of human and non-human matter. Such assemblages may be mapped as:

human bodies (informant, family/friends, strangers); non-human matter (alcohol, music, artistic and craft objects, clothing, technology, other artifacts); places and spaces (venue, pub/club/restaurant/leisure facility, built and natural environment); sociocultural contexts (artistic, leisure, natural etc.)

Several accounts noted how activities involving sport were occasions for alcohol consumption. These included participation in sport by respondents or partners, or watching sport in or outside the home, as the following extracts showed.

My partner's [drinking habits] are very similar to mine, the only thing is that he plays five-a-side football, so he will go to the pub every Wednesday, drink goodness knows what, I wouldn't dare to ask what he drinks during that time [laughs] ... he has that social element but often when we're in the home or we're out together we would be drinking the same things. (P3)

[My partner] would still go out and drink, he's in a football team so obviously alcohol is pretty central to their socialising ... I always know that if he's going to the cricket on a couple of the weekends and he'll get wasted at the cricket and come home at ten o'clock singing to himself [laughs] ... it's inevitable. (P10)

In these occasions, alcohol assembled with 'sporting' bodies and with non-human matter including equipment for playing hockey, cricket or football, spaces and places such as playfield and pubs, and norms and expectations associated with competitive sports. This assemblage may be summarized as:

human bodies (informant, partner, friends, team members, sports fans, strangers etc.); non-human matter (alcohol, sports paraphernalia, TV); places and spaces (sports ground, pub, home environmental etc.); cultural contexts associated with sport, including gender roles.

Together, these three generic alcohol assemblages supply insights into the variable ways in which human and non-human matter (including alcohol) assemble. What assembles these human and non-human materialities are the affects between them. To make sense of these alcohol assemblages, the next sub-section documents informants' insights into these affective flows.

Affects in alcohol consumption assemblages

Informants reported a multitude of ways in which alcohol was affective within the alcohol consumption assemblages. Flows of affect in assemblages are typically complex and rhizomatic: facilitating, inhibiting, or amplifying capacities. To simplify this complexity,

the affects between alcohol and human bodies can be differentiated into physical, psychological, sociocultural and economic.

Alcohol affected the physical materiality of informants' bodies variously. Alcohol's affective capacities to inebriate (or cause unpleasant side-effects) were amplified in the early parenting period. Several informants described how – after many months of almost complete abstinence during pregnancy, their tolerance level to alcohol in domestic or social occasions had substantially lowered. For example, P8 described her pregnancy as an 'entire detox' from alcohol. When she began to attend social events some months after giving birth, she observed that 'after having a year off drinking when you then have one glass suddenly you're tipsy, rather than a bottle like before'. Describing a dinner party with friends where alcohol was consumed, she reported that:

We got very drunk that night . . . Me and [partner] went for a meal and then we met up with a few friends . . . It was just one of these nights where we were just chatting away and we drank a lot. We woke up with very sore heads the next day . . . I'd say [I had] about eight pints? Me partner will have drunk about 12, but I can't drink that much! That's a really good night for me to drink about eight. (P8, domestic/family drinking assemblage)

Other informants revealed cravings for a drink, which conflicted with health promotion messages to pregnant women, emphasizing the detrimental consequences of alcohol on the foetus and the reproductive body. For P6, following this advice in the face of the physical cravings required self-control.

The research says [that] one or two glasses of wine is fine, but why would you even take the risk when you don't know how much of an effect it will have? So I don't drink anything at all. I think once you've had one glass you're just taunting yourself, you just want another one. I wouldn't want to have another one . . . psychologically for me, I feel like I'm better for it. (P6, domestic/family drinking assemblage)

Alcohol can affect the quality of men's and women's genetic material and capacity to conceive. However, P16 (who was undergoing fertilization (IVF) treatment with her partner) described how medical claims that alcohol differentially affected male and female bodies felt unfair, with more emphasis on women's bodies.

When you're going to NHS IVF, they are quite prescriptive . . . I can remember there being a bit of gasp in the room when they said the guidance, which is like two units for men and one for women . . . I thought that was nonsense and that men should have almost the same guidance as women. (P16, social drinking assemblage)

The accounts suggest that the physical affects produced by alcohol were also associated with psychological ones (see below).

Informants reported a range of alcohol's psychological affects: altering responses and reactions to the surrounding environment; facilitating intimacy and fun; and producing tensions concerning other family members' alcohol consumption. P19 described domestic circumstances in which she needed alcohol's affective capacity to induce a state of relaxation. At the end of a busy and tiring day of childcare in the home, an alcohol consumption assemblage

was characterized by a calm atmosphere. Drinking producing a suspension of the hectic, ordinary time and produced pleasant, soothing effects that she considered 'earned'.

I felt like I deserved [a drink], 'cause I had a busy day There was a beer in the fridge, so I was like 'Ok, I'm gonna have that'. He was nearly ready for bed, my husband went out, so I was like, 'Oh yeah, I'm just gonna have one beer' I thought it would have been refreshing, nice and just relaxing after the busy day. (P19, domestic/family drinking assemblage)

Similarly, P11 regretfully reported how in the past drinking alcohol in social settings had relaxed her: an affect she now no longer experienced following post-birth abstinence:

[Drinking] was quite a nice social thing that we did together. We used to have a couple of drinks at the pub or . . . at home and just feel a bit more relaxed . . . [Now] I think I'm a little bit too much on edge because I have the constant awareness of . . . [child] around and maybe I find it less easy to relax, feeling that I have to be constantly in control just in case anything happens. (P11, social drinking assemblage)

Other positive psychological affects of alcohol reported by informants included empowerment and self-affirmation. P6 asserted that 'I do like drinking', while for P5 and her female friend, alcohol consumption was a rebellion against the constraints of domestic life with small children and social identities as mothers.

We're allowed to have a life Now we can go out, and we can have sort of two or three bottles of wine, and we can have a girly chat and it doesn't become like, a race to get drunk It's more a 'mums sort of relaxing' kind of evening rather than a 'let's go out and get blotto drunk and go and wake up in some random man's bed'. (P5, social drinking assemblage)

Alcohol oiled the wheels of social interaction, as P6 described:

I went to a gin festival with one friend We went round all the stalls and tried . . . probably four gins each? . . . We had a really nice evening and then we came back to [town]. We had another glass of wine . . . when we got back. I was quite drunk by the end, but it was nice. (P6, social drinking assemblage)

With the onset of parenthood, such opportunities diminished for many of the informants. Some described how in domestic and social alcohol consumption assemblages, alcohol interacted with cultural norms and expectations associated with gender and 'respectable femininity' that constrained what female bodies could do, and in what contexts. P15 suggested she was uncomfortable drinking alone or excessively, though other behaviours such as drinking with a male partner, or in a 'civilized' or comfortable environment were morally acceptable.

I don't like drinking if I'm just sitting in house on my own I guess I don't think of it being appropriate It just feels a bit, you know, it's nice if my husband is at home to sit and have a glass of wine or something. (P15, domestic/family drinking assemblage)

For P7, an affective interaction between alcohol and moral expectations surrounding 'bad' or 'good' mothering triggered feelings of guilt and responsibility towards family members. She reported an occurring when, after a social drinking occasion the previous evening, she felt unwell. With her childcare duties to perform, she decided not to drink again while responsible for her children, 'because [childcare] is hard and it's not really fair'.

P10 described how alcohol consumption triggered a domestic gender divide between her male partner and herself. Home drinking elicited pleasant corporeal and emotional states for her partner such as relaxation, playfulness or carefreeness. By contrast, alcohol consumption negatively affected her, generating concern and alertness.

I would describe [partner] as somebody who loves drinking ... I reign him in, as he says that females stop males from drinking so much. He likes drinking at home and he stayed up till half one last night, and he had a bottle of wine, watching a film and then he had a beer, and he tells me he had no whisky ... I think he's probably a bit OTT ... I have to control him almost. (P10, domestic/family drinking assemblage)

Alcohol also interacted with longstanding norms and expectations in which women have the predominant role in unpaid domestic work. P11 reported that household and childcare responsibilities meant she no longer went out for social drinking occasions and rarely consumed alcohol at home. Meanwhile, sociocultural norms around hegemonic masculinity amplified opportunities for male partners to consume alcohol at home or socially (cf. Sec. 1c).

If it was one of [partner's] friend's birthdays, they'd tend to go to Manchester or Liverpool or somewhere for a night out and they'd have a long all-day drinking, and drinking all night, and have a quite a bit of a 'bender' as they call it. (P2, alcohol/sport assemblage)

The cost of alcohol affected many informants. Accounts of careful budgeting to address the family needs were frequent, and housing and childcare costs required a cut-back in alcohol spending. Material constraints shaped the configurations of alcohol assemblages, primarily producing a shift from public to home drinking, as more affordable.

However, this reconfiguration was not uniform, and alcohol consumption associated with sport and leisure activities was more likely to be retained or contested. The consequent economic pressures highlighted the gendered effects of alcohol consumption. As P7 pointed out, 'it's too expensive to drink ... if you can't afford it, you go without'. P11 reported that alcohol was often part of her husband's free time, and this entailed a resource allocation perceived as unfair, useless and frustrating. After the birth of their child, her husband's priorities had not change as radically as hers. This resulted in marked disappointment, as reflected in the account of her partner's habit of following sporting events live or on television while drinking alcohol:

I think sometimes it's just nice to feel relaxed at the same time ... Sometimes I have a tendency, because I am not drinking, to get annoyed at him, because he is drinking. And I feel like he's wasting all this money and I don't feel the need for a drink, so why does he feel the need for a drink? (P11, alcohol/sport assemblage)

Other informants reported a shift in how they engaged with alcoholic products, towards 'savouring' relatively expensive brands, such as Marlborough sauvignon blanc (P14), Barolo (P11), craft beers (P16) and 'nice gins' (P13), rather than bingeing on cheaper beverages. Consumption of these pricier products was often accompanied by other material changes in the alcohol assemblages, including settings and places, alcohol-related objects, clothing and appearance, as well as the intensity of the affects these products generated.

In the context of a market economy, alcohol also affected and exerted influences on informants through commercial market strategies that differentially address men and women consumers. The social drinking occasions described by informants revealed the success of alcohol brands specifically targeted at women. These included brands of alcoholic drinks that were coloured, or sweet and strong (such as alcopops and spirits), and products including sparkling rosé (P2), white wine and spritzers (P3), cocktails ('girly drinks' according to P5), light lager and fruity cider (P7), prosecco ('light and refreshing' reported P6), gin and tonic (a 'mature' drink, according to P4).

Alcohol and the production of gender binarism

The preceding sub-section has documented the multiplicity of affects associated with alcohol within more-than-human alcohol assemblages and revealed a range of the 'micropolitical' effects alcohol had on informants' bodies: shaping what they could or could do. Alcohol assemblages can human capacities, for instance, supplying opportunities for social interaction or reducing social or sexual inhibitions. They can capacities, as a consequence of the immediate or longer-term detrimental health and well-being effects of alcohol on bodies. And they can bodies that are dissimilar in most ways into socially defined categories such as affluent/poor, child-less/parent, working/middle class, and notably, into a male/female gender binary. The extracts provided in the previous sub-section have described ways in which these affects aggregated informants into this gender binary. Here we summarize these latter aggregating affects, referring back to the domestic, social and sports-inflected assemblages set out at the beginning of the findings section.

According to informants, many of alcohol's affects produced similar capacities in both female and male bodies: creating inebriation, oiling the wheels of social intercourse, supplying physical and mental relaxation or producing physical malaise following a heavy-drinking occasion. But while these affects (and the capacities they produced) might be ascribed solely to the chemical properties of ethyl alcohol, the earlier mapping of three alcohol consumption settings revealed how – within the events that make up daily life – alcohol is also affective within complex more-than-human assemblages that amongst other things aggregate bodies into, or dis-aggregate them from, gendered categories.

Alcohol consumption in domestic settings was caught up in the minutiae of daily life: watching TV, child-rearing, household duties and so forth. In these assemblages (as reported in the previous sub-section), informants such as P8 and P10 described how the physical affects produced by alcohol assemblages acted differentially on their and their partner's bodies, partly because alcohol abstinence during pregnancy had lowered tolerance to its inebriating capacities. Alcohol inebriation triggered psychological affects (guilt, anxiety) in P6, as it threatened her capacity to be a 'good mother', while P10 contrasted her virtual abstention from alcohol with her partner's excessive drinking once their young child was asleep. In contrast to these aggregations into a male/female gender binary, P19 described how after a busy day, with her son ready for bed and husband out, a bottle of beer was a 'refreshing' and 'relaxing' reward.

In social settings, alcohol assembled with different drinking venues, built and natural spaces, events and pursuits, along with a wider range of human bodies, including friends,

family and strangers. P11 reported how a complex assemblage of household and caring responsibilities, desires to act 'responsibly' towards her child and adhere to public health guidance on alcohol consumption during the perinatal period constrained her capacities to join her partner in drinking alcohol in non-domestic social settings. Other informants such as P14 and P5, however, reported how temporary release from childcare and household responsibilities to attend social occasions had supplied a licence to consume alcohol. The social drinking occasions described by many informants (documented in the 'economic and commercial affects' summary earlier) also show how they had been affected by the alcohol industry's marketing strategy of targeting specific alcoholic products and associated messages differentially towards male or female consumers.

In sport-inflected alcohol assemblages, many of the material elements (playing fields, pubs and other human bodies) were linked to sociocultural norms associated with masculinity. For informants, these sport-alcohol assemblages produced some of the most notable gender aggregations, with significant male alcohol consumption going hand-in-hand with sporting activities or events, both within and outside the home (see accounts of alcohol/sport assemblages). High alcohol consumption linked to sport-related activities also highlighted how the economic affects of alcohol contributed to a gendered response to the cost of its consumption outside the home. Although financial constraints frequently led informants to curtail drinking or shift to home consumption, sport-related drinking often remained tied to more expensive, public forms of consumption. This divergence rendered the cost of alcohol visible and contestable within households. As noted earlier, with a young child and the associated costs alcohol had become an unaffordable luxury for P7, while P11, considered alcohol an unnecessary expense, leading her to question her male partner's continued 'need for a drink' during leisure activities.

These data supply strong evidence for our proposition that the affective capacities of alcohol within the events of daily life contributed to the ongoing aggregation of informants and their partners within a male/female gender binary. We discuss this insight further in the concluding section.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has sought to advance scholarship on alcohol and gender by extending beyond studies that assess the impact of gender identity, structures and norms on physical, psychological and sociocultural experiences of alcohol and its consumption (Cook et al., 2022; Day et al., 2004; Emslie et al., 2015; Kersey et al., 2022; Lennox et al., 2018; Lyons, 2009) and essentialist alcohol research that positions male and female bodies as a binary opposition, overlooking the nuances within and between categories (Hunt & Antin, 2019). Instead, the study has explored how alcohol – understood as a lively material force – participates in the continuous, affective production of gendered identities. By applying a more-than-human and new materialist ontology, the paper has shown how alcohol operates as an agential component in assemblages that constitute everyday life, shaping and being shaped by human and non-human elements in the ongoing production of a gender binary.

Building on scholarship that conceives alcohol as an affective, relational and productive agent (Duff, 2014; Fraser et al., 2014; Jayne & Valentine, 2024; Waitt & Clement, 2016), the analysis employed a Deleuzian conceptual toolkit of

and [to](#) interrogate the sociomaterial entanglements through which gender emerges. This approach operationalized [Ash's \(2020\)](#) call for a relational, non-linear understanding of causation and responded to [Jayne and Valentine's \(2024, p. 96\)](#) invitation to unsettle assumptions surrounding alcohol, embodiment and identity. Through this lens, alcohol has been understood not as a neutral substance consumed by gendered subjects but as a constitutive force in the process of [– a continual, affective modulation of capacities and constraints that territorialize bodies as 'male' or 'female' \(Braidotti, 2013; Grosz, 1993\)](#) and also 'not-becoming' ([Barad, 2010, p. 265](#)).

The findings contribute to contemporary feminist and queer theoretical debates that challenge gender binarism ([Allred et al., 2014; Braidotti, 2022](#)), while also engaging with research on how technological and institutional settings sustain or disrupt binary gender formations ([Haapio-Kirk, 2024; Leach & Turner, 2015](#)). The study recognizes that gender dualism and its associated inequalities persist across societies, but it reframes their emergence not as the effect of overarching structures such as patriarchy or hegemonic masculinity ([Latour, 2005](#)), but as a product of the micropolitical flows of affect within everyday assemblages. These flows constitute what [Leach and Turner \(2015\)](#) call [– the mutual shaping of the social and material.](#)

This reorientation towards a distributed, more-than-human understanding of gendered power reveals that the gender binary is continually re-enacted through the affective intensities of alcohol assemblages. The study traced how alcohol's affects – its capacities to animate, constrain, and reconfigure human bodies – interacted with other materialities such as childcare objects, medical technologies, and domestic environments. For instance, in the assemblages surrounding early parenthood, alcohol emerged as a form of [\(Bennett, 2010\)](#) whose circulation through mundane moments of domestic life contribute to shape gendered experiences of responsibility, mobility and sociability ([Boyer, 2018; Dombroski, 2018; Neely, 2023](#)). The incapacity to drink, or the moral and affective weight attached to drinking, unevenly constrained women's capacities and reinforced gendered expectations surrounding care and self-control. In this sense, alcohol operates as both a disciplining and productive force that materially enacts the binary distinctions between 'mother' and 'father', 'responsible' and 'irresponsible', and 'feminine' and 'masculine' ([Fraser et al., 2014](#)).

Importantly, the analysis also revealed moments in which alcohol destabilized or exceeded these gendered codings. For some participants, alcohol consumption offered a [\(Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 277\)](#) – a temporary release from the affective constraints of domesticity, care and heteronormative roles. These episodes of de-territorialization allowed individuals to experience expanded bodily capacities, pleasure and sociability. Yet such transformations were ambivalent: often framed as exceptional or permissible only within tightly bounded temporal and spatial contexts (for instance, a night out sanctioned by others' childcare). Consequently, alcohol's potential to open new gendered possibilities was simultaneously contained within existing paradigms. The micropolitics of alcohol thus comprise both transformative and conservative tendencies, producing an uneven terrain of freedom and constraint that mirrors broader gendered asymmetries.

These findings reframe power not as a possession or structural imposition but as emergent from the distributed and affective relations between human and non-human entities. Power, from this perspective, flows through assemblages rather than descending

from abstract systems (Braidotti, 2013; Latour, 2005). Alcohol's role in gender becoming, therefore, lies in how its affects align with other material, economic and spatial forces to modulate capacities – what bodies can do, feel and become. From the exuberant energies of a 'lads' night out' to the moderated conviviality of a family meal, alcohol's agency is both socially patterned and materially generative. Its capacities to enable connection, risk, pleasure, or care are differentially distributed, producing the repeated aggregation of bodies into recognizable categories of 'men' and 'women' (Lorraine, 2008).

By foregrounding these micropolitical processes, the paper contributes a novel theoretical and methodological approach to the sociology of alcohol and gender. It demonstrates how a new materialist ontology makes visible the entanglements of matter and affects in the everyday reproduction of gender binarism. Gender, in this framing, is not an attribute of bodies but a fluctuating configuration of affects – the continual differentiation and convergence that Grosz (1993, p. 178) described as 'a thousand tiny sexes'. By assessing the micropolitical flows of power and resistance through alcohol assemblages, the final section of the findings suggested how these proliferations repeatedly collapse back into a prevailing binary (Lorraine, 2008; Zeeman & Aranda, 2023).

The implications of these insights extend beyond gender theory to public health and social policy. Recognizing alcohol as an affective agent that shapes gendered subjectivities challenges prevailing assumptions that treat drinking behaviours as outcomes of individual choice or moral weakness. Such assumptions underpin sexist and stigmatizing framings of women's drinking (Bell et al., 2009; Day et al., 2004; Lennox et al., 2018) and reinforce the very binaries this study critiques. A more nuanced, relational understanding of alcohol's affective capacities could inform health interventions that address not only the physiological risks of consumption but also its socio-material entanglements with identity, embodiment and inequality.

Furthermore, the study points towards new directions for research on how alcohol assemblages intersect with other social dimensions connected to health and well-being. Economic, spatial and biological factors modulate alcohol's affective potentials, indicating that the various gendered experiences of drinking cannot be disentangled from dis/advantage, mobility and access to resources. For instance, because we drew on data from informants across a socio-economic spectrum, our analysis revealed how social and economic affects in alcohol assemblages interact with other flows of affects associated with gender (see for example, the data reported by P11). This offers empirical support for the new materialist re-thinking of intersectionality proposed by Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2013). The analysis also highlights the need to explore alcohol's role in gender becoming across diverse life stages and global contexts. While this study focused on heterosexual participants in a high-income setting, future work might examine how alcohol participates in gender becoming across queer, trans or non-binary experiences, and within low- or middle-income environments where material and affective conditions differ.

The paper also opens conceptual pathways for applying new materialist perspectives to other domains of health and embodiment – such as smoking, drug use, or food consumption – where non-human materials similarly shape social differentiation (Fox, 2024). In questioning the figure of the rational, self-governing individual that dominates neoliberal health approaches, a more-than-human framework repositions agency as distributed, contingent and co-produced. This shift destabilizes the moralism often attached to health-related behaviours and invites a more equitable approach to

understanding how bodies and environments mutually constitute each other in processes of becoming.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of work that reconceptualizes gender as a dynamic, affective process rather than a fixed social category. By analysing alcohol as a vibrant, agential participant in assemblages of everyday life, the paper has demonstrated how the gender binary is not merely reproduced through popular culture and social norms but materially enacted through the micropolitical flows of affect that shape bodies, spaces and relations. At the same time, it has shown that these flows are not unidirectional: they also contain the seeds of transformation, offering fleeting glimpses of alternative becomings beyond binary categorization. The paper invites scholars and practitioners to ask not simply how alcohol reflects gendered norms, but what alcohol —how it acts within the complex ecologies of bodies, materials and affects that sustain, challenge or reconfigure the gender binary.

Acknowledgments

The first Author would like to thank Prof. Paul Bissell, Prof. Penny Buykx, and Prof. Petra Meier for their guidance and support during the primary data collection. The authors are also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the original manuscript.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Serena Vicario:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing – original draft; **Nick J. Fox:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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